

Good Evening Senator McCrory, Senator Osten, Representative Walker, ranking members Miner and France and distinguished members of the Appropriations Committee:

My name is Mary Bernstein, I am from West Hartford. I am a board member of Connecticut Against Gun Violence. I am a professor and I study gun violence prevention efforts.

I am testifying in support of the \$3.6 million included in the Governor's budget adjustment bill for the Department of Public Health to fund gun violence prevention programs.

I quote from the Kerner Commission Report on violence in urban areas published in 1968<sup>1</sup>, which embraced three principles:

"To mount programs on a scale equal to the dimension of the problems"

"To aim these programs for high impact in the immediate future in order to close the gap between promise and performance"

"To undertake new initiatives and experiments that can change the system of failure and frustration that now dominates [racially oppressed communities that experience high levels of gun violence] and weakens our society."

"These programs will require unprecedented levels of funding and performance, but they neither probe deeper nor demand more than the problems which called them forth. There can be no higher priority for national action and no higher claim on the nation's conscience."

I believe that racial justice cannot be achieved if Black people experience gun violence at far higher rates than white people. Connecticut [victims](#) of gun homicide are disproportionately people of color. Approximately 56% of the state's gun homicide victims are Black; however, only 10% of the state's population is Black. Young Black men in Connecticut are almost 39 times more likely to be [murdered](#) with a gun than similarly aged white men. And this does not take into account the large number of people who survive their gun injuries, but whose lives are forever plagued by ongoing physical disabilities and mental health trauma.

The Kerner Commission Report was published 54 years ago and there have been few to no ongoing coordinated efforts to reduce gun violence and improve conditions in impoverished segregated neighborhoods. When gun violence is part of the daily lives of people in certain communities, we need to ask why we allow that to continue.

Noted crime researcher Thomas Abt at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government who worked in the Department of Justice said, "I felt like everything we needed to know was out there, but no one had put it together,"

He was right. The problem is that government has either engaged in inaction, failing to address the underlying causes of gun violence or the government has engaged in punitive action which, which has devastated Black and Brown communities by

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.hud.gov/sites/dfiles/FHEO/documents/kerner\\_commission\\_full\\_report.pdf](https://www.hud.gov/sites/dfiles/FHEO/documents/kerner_commission_full_report.pdf)

contributing to mass incarceration while failing to reduce violence. Punitive action exacerbates the conditions that foster gun violence in the first place.

Community based organizations that have a proven track record at reducing gun violence have to scramble for each and every dollar they receive which hurts their ability to do their work which we know reduces gun violence. Uncertainty in funding makes it hard to work together in a coordinated effort to reduce gun violence.

So the only way to move forward in a comprehensive way is to establish an Office of Gun Violence Prevention to finally address the issues that are devastating Black and Brown communities. If we can stop the violence, we will reduce the ongoing trauma that these communities suffer and spark economic investment which will be a first step in creating a more equal and just society. It's time to do what the Kerner Commission suggested we do over 50 years ago to address the conditions that foster gun violence. I urge you to vote to fund the \$3.6 million allocation to the Department of Public Health for community violence prevention included in Governor's Bill 5037

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Mary Bernstein, West Hartford CT